



Events and
Discussion Questions

2022
**Reading
Together**
for
**20
YEARS**

THE BEST WE COULD DO

Meet the Author:
Thi Bui

Event Moved Online!
Tuesday, March 22, 2022
7 pm | KPL Live

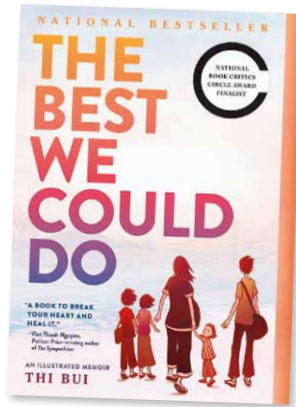
Please visit: readingtogether.us

About The Best We Could Do

This is the first time that a graphic novel has been selected for the *Reading Together* program. This beautifully illustrated and emotional story is an evocative memoir about the search for a better future and a longing for the past. Exploring the anguish of immigration and the lasting effects that displacement has on a child and her family, Thi Bui documents the story of her family's daring escape after the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s, and the difficulties they faced building new lives for themselves.

At the heart of Bui's story is a universal struggle: While adjusting to life as a first-time mother, she ultimately discovers what it means to be a parent—the endless sacrifices, the unnoticed gestures, and the depths of unspoken love. Despite how impossible it seems to take on the simultaneous roles of both parent and child, Bui pushes through. With haunting, poetic writing and breathtaking art, she examines the strength of family, the importance of identity, and the meaning of home.

In what Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen calls “a book to break your heart and heal it,” *The Best We Could Do* brings to life Thi Bui's journey of understanding and provides inspiration to all of those who search for a better future while longing for a simpler past.



About the Author



Thi Bui was born in Vietnam and came to the United States in 1978 as part of the “boat people” wave of refugees fleeing Southeast Asia at the end of the Vietnam War. Her debut graphic memoir, *The Best We Could Do* (Abrams ComicArts, 2017) has been selected for an American Book Award, a Common Book for UCLA and other colleges and universities, an all-city read by Seattle and San Francisco public libraries, a National Book Critics Circle finalist in autobiography, and an Eisner Award finalist in reality-based comics. It made over thirty best of 2017 book lists, including Bill Gates' top five picks. She illustrated the picture book, *A Different Pond*, written by the poet Bao Phi (Capstone, 2017), for which

she won a Caldecott Honor. With her son, Hien, she co-illustrated the children's book, *Chicken of the Sea* (McSweeney's, 2019), written by Pulitzer winner Viet Thanh Nguyen and his son, Ellison. Her short comics can be found online at The Nib, PEN America, and BOOM California. She is currently researching and drawing a work of graphic nonfiction about immigrant detention and deportation, to be published by One World, Random House.

Visit readingtogether.us for more info, including:

- A video recording of the preview presentation by Dr. Gwen Tarbox from Western Michigan University on *Getting the Most Out of Reading Graphic Novels*.
- A complete listing of local book discussions where community residents can talk with each other about *The Best We Could Do*.

Discussion Questions (used with permission from Seattle Public Library)

1. How do Bui's art and the graphic memoir format frame your reading experience?
2. Why do you think Bui chose to mostly limit color to red-orange ink washes? What work does the color perform in setting the scene and telling the story Bui wants to tell? How does Bui's use of limited color guide the reader through the narrative? What themes arise and are reinforced through Bui's use of color?
3. Early in the book, Bui says, “Family is now something I have created and not just something I was born into” (p. 21). What about being a parent and creating her own family makes Bui see her parents in a different light? How do family dynamics change when new family members enter the fold? Why, for instance, do you think Má speaks more openly about her past with Bui's husband?
4. In moving back to California to be closer to her parents, Bui realizes “proximity and closeness are not the same” (p. 31). How is a feeling of closeness cultivated? Why can it be so hard for family relationships to change?
5. This memoir explores themes of belonging and otherness. What creates a sense of belonging in a culture? What are the ways in which members of the Bui family were made to feel “other” in America? How do they adjust to their new home? What obstacles do they face?
6. How does the Bui family's experience as refugees illuminate your understanding of the refugee experience?
7. Four siblings in the Bui family survived, but Má lost two children. Bui writes: “Lan, like me, was a replacement” (p. 50). How does this memoir explore the effects of grief and loss?
8. Bui describes her father's moodiness and frightening stories, and the terror she felt “was only the long shadow of his own” (p. 129). Do you think Bô was aware of the emotional worlds of his children or that his stories scared them? How did grief and loss affect him?
9. Bui is determined to learn more about her family's history and her parents' pasts. Why do you think her parents did not share their histories in Vietnam with their children? How do trauma and the effects of war and displacement affect families? How does Bui break through the silence to uncover these stories?
10. How did reading *The Best We Could Do* change your knowledge and understanding of the Vietnam War? Has it changed your view of French and American involvement?
11. How does media representation shape your understanding of conflict? (p. 206)
12. How does the use of photographs affect your understanding of the characters? Do the photographs read as a more real reproduction of these individuals than drawings? Considering how many material objects Bui's family has lost, and the importance the family places on official documents, does the fact that these photographs are official documents the family has saved influence how we interpret their use on the page?

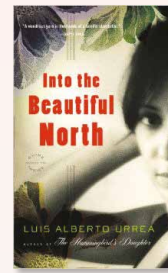
Additional questions and free teacher's guide available for download from the publisher at: [scribd.com/document/349344168/The-Best-We-Could-Do-Teaching-Guide](https://www.scribd.com/document/349344168/The-Best-We-Could-Do-Teaching-Guide)

20 Years of Reading Together titles

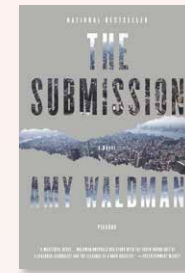
2022 marks the 20th year of *Reading Together*. The first *Reading Together* title was announced by Kalamazoo Public Library — in partnership with the Better Together initiative at the Kalamazoo Community Foundation—in January 2003. In the intervening years, the program has become one of KPL's annual signature events. A different book (or author) has been selected every year, with the goal of bringing our community together through the common experience of reading and discussing the same book.

Here are the titles selected for *Reading Together* since its inception.

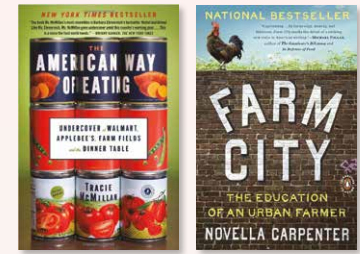
***Featured an in-person (or online) appearance by the author.**



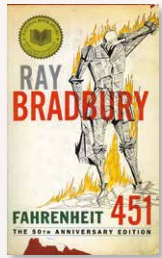
2012: *Into the Beautiful North*
Luis Alberto Urrea*



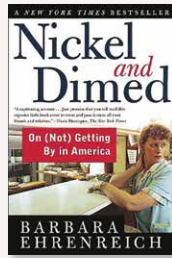
2013: *The Submission*
Amy Waldman*



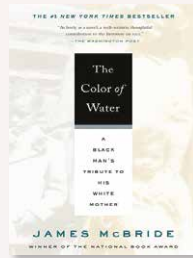
2014: *The American Way of Eating*
Tracie McMillan*
Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer
Novella Carpenter*



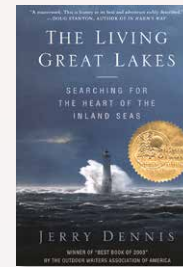
2003: *Fahrenheit 451*
Ray Bradbury



2004: *Nickel and Dime*
Barbara Ehrenreich



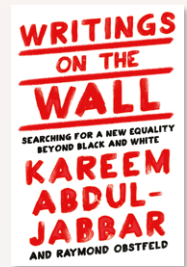
2005: *The Color of Water*
James McBride*



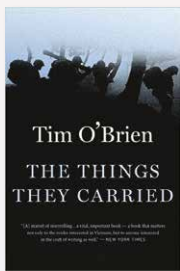
2015: *The Living Great Lakes: Searching for the Heart of the Inland Seas*
Jerry Dennis*



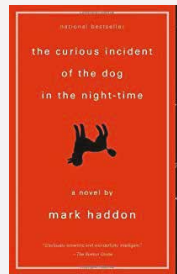
2016: *Orphan Train*
Christina Baker Kline*



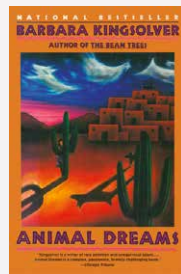
2017: *Writings on the Wall: Searching for a New Equality Beyond Black and White*
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar*



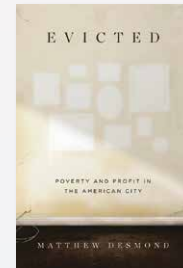
2006: *The Things They Carried*
Tim O'Brien*



2007: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*
Mark Haddon



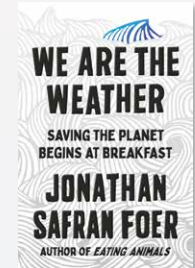
2008: *Animal Dreams*
Barbara Kingsolver



2018: *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*
Matthew Desmond*



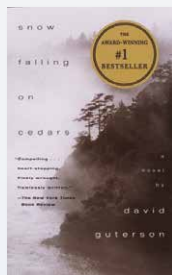
2019: *The Hate U Give*
Angie Thomas



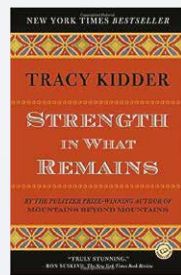
2020: *We are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*
Jonathan Safran Foer*



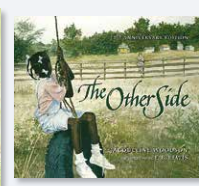
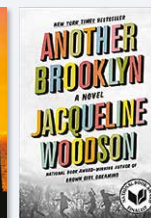
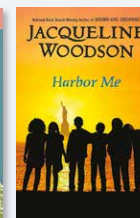
2009: *All Over but the Shoutin', Ava's Man, and Prince of Frogtown*
Rick Bragg*



2010: *Snow Falling on Cedars*
David Guterson*



2011: *Strength in What Remains*
Tracy Kidder*



2021 (online): multiple titles
Jacqueline Woodson*

Events

The location/modality of all events is subject to change.

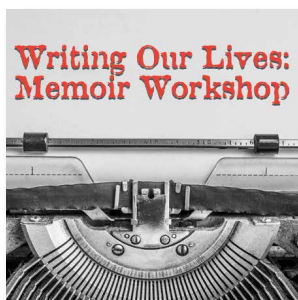
Please see readingtogether.us for up-to-date guidelines and more details.



Visual Storytelling

Saturday, February 12 | 11 am–12:30 pm | KPL Live

Spend some time with Aubrey Jewel Rodgers, Animation/Game Art Program Coordinator and Graphic Arts Instructor at KVCC, as she helps us explore visual storytelling in this interactive program. Playing with classic stories as well as contemporary, we will learn to draw from the mind's eye with the power of words. From there, we will learn to identify clues in a visual narrative that will help us invoke curiosity, emotion, and a stronger connection to story.



Writing Our Lives: Memoir Workshop

Saturday, February 26 | 1–4 pm | Zoom

This workshop requires no expertise or experience—just a willingness to explore and share. Participants will write a brief memoir-sketch to share with others and take away some tips for writing about the mysterious self. Gail Griffin taught writing for 36 years at Kalamazoo College and has offered several very popular workshops for community members. She is the author of four books of nonfiction (including the recent *Grief's Country: A Memoir in Pieces*, a Michigan Notable Book for 2021) along with many memoir essays and poems published in journals and anthologies. Please register at kpl.gov to receive your Zoom link to attend and be prepared to write during the workshop (on paper or on your device).



Displaced Persons in Southwest Michigan

Tuesday, March 8 | 6–7:30 pm | KPL Live

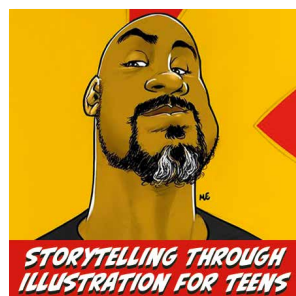
Learn from a refugee community services specialist, a program coordinator, and an ESL coordinator about services for displaced peoples in our area. Hear personal stories and learn about the process prior to arrival to the US, and the challenges and adjustments faced as they resettle in our community. Presented by Sara Blomgren from Bethany Christian Services, Shukurani Nsengiyumva with the Kalamazoo Refugee Resource Collaborative, and Wessam Abdelaziz from Kalamazoo Public Schools.



When Trauma Gets Passed Down Along with Blessings

Thursday, March 10 | 6–7:30 pm | KPL Live

Join E Simon Wolff for a talk and Q & A on intergenerational trauma — trauma that gets passed down from those who directly experience it to subsequent generations. E will share how intergenerational trauma impacts and manifests in individuals, families, and collectives of people of shared cultural, racial, and/or ethnic identities, whose ancestors experienced significant trauma and oppression. As an antiracist white racialized Jewish healer and facilitator, E will speak from their direct experience with intergenerational trauma, as well as their training and practice within the field of politicized somatic, ancestral, and cultural trauma healing.



Storytelling Through Illustration for Teens

Monday, March 14 | 6–7 pm | Zoom

Local artist and author Kenji Jumanne Marshall will be leading an instructional, hands-on program for Teens. Please register at kpl.gov to receive your supplies and Zoom link to participate.



We Are Our Stories: Being Asian and Asian American in Kalamazoo

Tuesday, March 15 | 6–7:30 pm | KPL Live

Come listen to Asian and Asian American members of the Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) Affinity Group from Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT) Kalamazoo, a comprehensive, national, and community-based process developed by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to identify and address the historic and contemporary effects of racism. Hear histories, stories, and experiences from community members about their families and their cultural identities.

Most of these events are being presented on KPL Live.
Please visit kpl.gov/live at the date and time shown below to join.

Sponsorship and Partners

This year's *Reading Together* is sponsored by Friends of Kalamazoo Public Library.

Kalamazoo Public Library gratefully acknowledges the partners who have participated in all 20 years of *Reading Together* as financial supporters, event hosts, program presenters, and committee members.

This year we especially want to thank the following individuals and organizations for their role in bringing *Reading Together 2022* to our community.

Amy Brandt

Angela Graham

Anna Moss

Aubrey Jewell Rodgers

Brianna Jackson

Dawn Richmond

Disability Network Southwest Michigan

E Simon Wolff

Elizabeth Manwell

Fetzer Institute

Gail Griffin

Gwen Athene Tarbox

Jennifer Heymoss

Juliana Espinosa

Kala Luzia

Kalamazoo College

Kalamazoo Community Foundation

Kalamazoo Public Schools

Kalamazoo Valley Community College

Karen Woodworth

Kenji Jumanne Marshall

Leatrice Fullerton

Lisa Godfrey

The Michigan News Agency

Parchment Community Library

Pamela Rups

Portage District Library

Ruth Cowles

Sandra Farag

Sara Blomgren

Shahana Afsar

Shukurani Nsengiyumva

Stacy Nowicki

Theodore Gill

Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation
(TRHT) Kalamazoo

Wessam Abdelaziz

Western Michigan University

Ying Zeng

Zoey Blake

More details can be found at:
readingtogether.us



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